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Morocco: Situation of Christians in Morocco; their treatment by Islamists; state protection (January 2003 - June 2005)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Numbers and location

The exact number of Christians living in Morocco is unknown, but is estimated as being between 25,000 (International Religious Freedom Report 2004 15 Sept. 2004, sec. 1) and 30,000 (Catholic Online 23 Jan. 2005), or about 1.1 per cent of the population (Freedom House 15 Sept. 2004). Some sources indicate that about 7,000 Moroccans have converted to Christianity (Algérie-dz.com 25 Apr. 2005; Le Journal hebdomadaire 8-14 Jan. 2005) over the past decade (ibid.). According to an article in Le Journal hebdomadaire, these new conversions are primarily the work of Protestants (ibid.). However, the number of conversions (7,000) could not be corroborated by the Research Directorate. The number of Protestants seems even more difficult to determine: according to the Morocco Times, there are anywhere from 800 to 40,000 Moroccan Protestants and 150 to 200 or 300 missionaries (9 Mar. 2005).


Overall situation for Christians

According to the archbishop of Rabat, Christians and Muslims in Morocco coexist in friendship and fraternity (Catholic Online 23 Jan. 2005). He also stated that 12,000 Muslims attend schools run jointly by the Christian and Muslim communities and that many Christians study and work in Muslim-run institutions (ibid.). He noted that Christians in Morocco can openly practise their religion, provided that they do not try to proselytize (ibid.; see also International Religious Freedom Report 2004 15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2). Any attempt to convert a Muslim is illegal and, under section 220 of the penal code, is punishable by three to six months' imprisonment and a fine of up to 575 dirhams [CAN$78 (XE.com 20 June 2005)] (International Religious Freedom Report 2004 15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2).


Protestant missionaries

A number of sources indicated a strong reaction to the presence of Protestant missionaries in Morocco, especially regarding the number of Moroccans who have allegedly converted or who could convert to Protestant Christianity (Morocco Times 9 Mar. 2005; Algérie-dz.com 25 Apr. 2005; Aujourd'hui le Maroc 3 June 2004; Le Matin 8 Mar. 2005). For example, a member of parliament representing the Istiqlal party has reportedly expressed concerns that the Protestant missionaries' objective is to convert 10 per cent of the Moroccan population by 2020 (Morocco Times 9 Mar. 2005; see also Algérie-dz.com 12 May 2005). However, the Islamic affairs minister disagreed, stating that the activities of Christian religious people in Morocco were "known" to the government and that they limited themselves to working in their own religious community (Aujourd'hui le Maroc 11 May 2005; Algérie-dz.com 12 May 2005).

An Evangelical minister blamed what he called sensationalism in the media, which he accused of stigmatizing the Protestant church in Morocco by trying to establish links between that church and American politics (Le Matin 8 Mar. 2005; Morocco Times 9 Mar. 2005). According to the minister, the main role of Evangelicals in Morocco is to help Protestant Christians living there, many of whom are students from sub-Saharan Africa (Le Matin 8 Mar. 2005; Morocco Times 9 Mar. 2005).

An Aujourd'hui le Maroc article reports that evangelization is as strong in Morocco's cities as in the countryside (3 June 2004). According to Afrik.com, Morocco currently has about 800 American Baptist church missionaries who are proselytizing around the country; however, a minister in Casablanca stated that they are [translation] "making very little progress" (16 Mar. 2005). A Le Monde article states that the missionaries limit their
evangelization campaigns to the "colonial communities," such as the French and Spanish, and do not try to convert indigenous Moroccans (6 Mar. 2005).

Treatment of Christians and state protection


The Daily Telegraph reports that between 1995 and 2005, a number of Christians were imprisoned for proselytizing (9 May 2005). In addition, the International Religious Freedom Report 2004 notes cases where the government briefly detained a small number of converts and denied passports to some Christians for proselytizing (15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2). In May 2004, the government expelled seven foreign missionaries, including four Americans, for distributing Christian materials in a public square in Marrakech; other missionaries have been questioned or have been denied temporary residence permits as a result of their proselytizing (International Religious Freedom Report 2004 15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2). In addition, Arabic-language Bibles can be confiscated by the authorities, even though there is no law banning them (ibid.).

In spring 2004, the Moroccan government began a regular dialogue with the Evangelical churches in Morocco, a gesture that the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) called "a great beginning" (NAE 8 Apr. 2004; The Washington Times 24 Feb. 2005).

The International Religious Freedom Report 2004 stated that in March 2004, the Moroccan government registered the "Protestant Church of Rabat" (15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2). That church joins the group of churches, including the Evangelical, Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican churches, which have been granted non-profit association status (International Religious Freedom Report 2004 15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2).

In July 2004, five Christians who had renounced Islam had problems with their identity documents (HRWF 19 July 2004; ibid. 24 Aug. 2004). The authorities reportedly confiscated three documents and refused to renew two passports (Middle East Concern 19 Jul. 2004). Although a Christian woman got her passport back, two Christian men were questioned by police for six hours, and their passports were not returned (ibid. n.d.).

According to a number of sources, since winter 2005, French and Moroccan authorities have worked together to restore the approximately 120 Christian cemeteries in Morocco (MIC 5 Feb. 2005; Aujourd'hui le Maroc 8 Feb. 2005; Emarrakech 4 Feb. 2005; The Canadian Press 4 Feb. 2005).


Society's treatment of Christians

Citing a poll by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, the NAE indicated that approximately 73 per cent of Moroccans had "unfavorable attitudes towards Christians" (8 Apr. 2004). The International Religious Freedom Report 2004 stated that Moroccans who convert to Christianity "face social ostracism" (15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2). According to the NAE, "indigenous Christians feel restrained [in their ability to openly practise their religion] for fear of social reprisal" (8 Apr. 2004). Without citing any specific examples, a Le Monde article reports that Moroccans who convert to Christianity sometimes receive death threats (6 Mar. 2005). An article in Le Journal hebdomadaire reports that new Protestant Christians in Morocco [translation] "gather in secret churches with fewer than 15 followers, and they practice their religion in total secrecy" (8-14 Jan. 2005). A Le Monde article states that Moroccan converts hide not because they fear how police might treat them, as they [translation] "do not represent a danger to the regime," but to avoid being ostracized by their family, their employer, their colleagues and their neighbours (6 Mar. 2005).

Treatment of Christians by Islamists

No information on the treatment of Moroccan Christians by Islamists could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints for this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


Additional Sources Consulted